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A NEAPOLITAN SONNETEER

BY RUTH SHEPARD PHELPS

THE tourist in a European city where he has no acquaintance, and whither he has gone, after the manner of most such visitors, unprovided with letters to establish him in social relations there, peoples it for himself with literary associations. Every beautiful woman who rides towards him down the Champs Elysées in a luxurious victoria is Mme. de Beauséant, every young elegant is Maxime de Trailles; any frowning Venetian *palazzo* may be hiding the swift decline of Milly Theale, any fair estate is Matcham.

And so, as he is being swept along in a steamer bound for Naples, past the strung-out necklace of sapphire islands, past Posilipo and Cape Misenum to where the city rises white and shell-shaped to the Castello, he will see that splendid panorama perhaps as the setting for the leisures and love-affairs of elegant foreigners like the English father and daughter and their French visitor in Gautier's *Jettatura*, or for the pretty but less richly appointed American romance of Aldrich's *Two Bites at a Cherry*, or for the pathetic idyl of *Graziella*.

But unless he knows the native literature well enough to have read at least Matilde Serao's *Paese di Cuccagna*, he will perhaps not be thinking at all of the true Neapolitan life, that swarming, seething, passionate life of Via di Toledo, of the *popolani* who breed and stifle in the insanitary *Funneco verde*, get themselves condemned to the prison of San Francisco, claim sanctuary in Sta. Maria del Rifugio, or amuse themselves in the theatre of *o Fondo*.

Yet this is the Naples of Signor Salvatore di Giacomo, and it has sufficed him as subject for the successive volumes of a lifetime. From his first essays at short stories, recently assembled with an introduction by Benedetto Croce in a volume called *Novelle Napolitane*, to the collection of verse, *Canzoni e ariette*

nove, published in 1916, he has never but once wandered further afield than across the bay to Sorrento or around the point to Marechiaro, nor touched the social order at a higher level than some superannuated second-rate actress, or the *padrone* of a cheap *tintoria* or *osteria*. His one excursion beyond the confining circle of the Bay was a musical, poetical, studious sojourn at Ulm, which produced a collection of German sketches not very characteristic or full of interest.

Usually even the lower bourgeoisie is above the skyline of his interest, which centres in the grotesque and tragic elements of Neapolitan low life. There are beggars and gamblers, hunchbacks, thieves, women of evil life, vagabonds who have come down in the world, butchers, puppet-showmen, swagger non-coms who turn the heads of foolish girls and then forsake them, jailers and jailbirds, and keepers of the secret lottery banks. These varied folk sing the famous street songs of Naples, and sometimes write them; they go to the theatres of the marionettes; they listen to the recitations of fifteenth century *cantastorie* who still narrate at the street corners the prowess of Orlando, and send their listeners home to lie awake with anxiety because the brave Rinaldo has fallen into the hands of the treacherous Maganzesi; they fall in and out of love, and when they grow suspicious of a sweetheart's fidelity punish her with the *rasoiata*, a razor-cut on the cheek that spoils her beauty and keeps her faithful.

The war has supervened now upon this swarming life, but except that they have doubtless learned to hate the *Tedeschi* harder, it is not easy to believe that the Neapolitans of Via di Toledo have any concern with its causes and objects, except to clamor for Fiume when they are flown with wine. What they will care about is to learn that Caruli's Peppe will never return, because he was killed in action, or that Amalia's Tito has returned, but not to her.

An Italian observer recently in the United States, who found it equally astonishing to Latin blood that there should be schools of philanthropy and schools of journalism, remarked that in Italy, *Si nasce giornalista come si nasce poeta*. Signor di Giacomo was born both, and the journalist, poking about the wharves and rookeries of lower Naples, studying the *mala vita* of the old mari-

time city, found the subjects which the poet has interpreted in both verse and prose.

Above all, in verse, Di Giacomo is a great lyric poet, and his Neapolitan songs are on the lips of every guitarist under the tourist's window at night, and the tarantella is often danced to them at Sorrento. His are the loveliest songs composed each year for the Piedigrotta festival, every one a miracle of melody. Indeed when Benedetto Croce brought the early short stories together in a volume in 1914, he did so avowedly to show the public that the well-known poet could write prose.

But he is also a striking dramatic poet, and for the versifying of that colorful Neapolitan life he has invented what is almost a new form, a kind of dramatic sonnet—a terse, jerky, nearly monosyllabic dialogue or monologue, fitted into fourteen lines of correctly rhyming hendecasyllabics, oftentimes with even a line or two of stage directions, and a list of *dramatis personæ*. The dialogue sonnet, indeed, is not new in Italian literature. It was practised in the fifteenth century, for example, by the quick wit and ready pen of Antonio Cammelli (*Il Pistoia*), and a line which he addresses to himself might well be the device of Di Giacomo:

Di tutto quel che vedi fai sonetti.

But the latter carries his dialogue a step further, forcing it to tell a story, and has compressed a hundred little episodes of humble life, violent, pitiful, or shabby, into the most stately and traditional of lyric forms. To make the challenge sharper, they are, like every other line of his verse, in the Neapolitan dialect.

The question of the vitality and survival value of dialects is an interesting one. Even recognized languages would seem somewhat threatened by the development of international ideals, and the Italian dialects, scattered over a land of no great extent, appear to be doomed to blend and vanish with the advent of political union, conscription and compulsory education; yet they were never more flourishing, and seem to be declaring for a self-determination which endangers the prestige of Tuscan and the Manzonian vocabulary. Grazia Deledda and Giovanni Verga have accustomed us to the frequent appearance of Sardinian and Sicilian words and phrases in their pages, and for a classic

example of single works composed wholly in dialect there is Goldoni, with his many comedies in Venetian; but it is more surprising to find an important modern poet confining all his poetic composition within the frontiers of a dialect.

The literary use of dialect is sharply questioned by some critics, but perhaps it may be dismissed as less a literary problem than a human. The authenticity of the impulse is the great thing, and the unself-consciousness of its use. If dialect feels most like his native language to the poet, and he is not merely attempting a learned "revival", then no doubt he will write in dialect best. A contemporary of Signor di Giacomo, Luigi Pirandello, who has recently published a comedy composed entirely in Sicilian, writes on this question with great good sense in the preface to his play:

The act of creation, the imaginative activity which the writer must furnish, whether he use dialect or language, is always the same. If it be the same, why, then, does the writer make use of the dialect, that is, of a means of communication necessarily more limited, instead of the language? . . . Either the poet is not in possession of the wider means of communication, that is, the language; or, having knowledge of it, he yet feels himself unable to wield it with that vivacity, that spontaneous intimacy which is the primary and indispensable condition of art; or else the nature of his sentiments and concepts is so rooted in the region of which he is making himself the interpreter that any form of expression other than dialect would seem to him unsuitable and incoherent; or the thing to be represented is so local that he could not find expression for it outside the limits of the thing itself. A dialect literature, in short, is designed to remain within the borders of the dialect. If it goes beyond them, it will be enjoyed only by those who are familiar with the given dialect, and with the peculiar usages, customs and life which the dialect expresses.

So we may suppose, as long as Scots'is alive on Scottish tongues or in Scottish memories, that Burns is as sure of his place in English literature as Shakespeare, though he must put up with fewer readers. But Burns is an imperfect parallel to Signor di Giacomo, because a prime characteristic of these dramatic sonnets is their effect of contemporaneity. Kipling might be a better one, save that his verses are not sonnets; or the now forgotten but excellent *Love Sonnets of a Hoodlum* and the *Love Sonnets of a Street Car Conductor*, which present the same impertinent contrast between stately form and slangy idiom, save that they are not dramatic but meditative. The result of Signor di Giacomo's experiment

is most like, perhaps, a *Limehouse Nights* in sonnet sequence; but a *Limehouse Nights* lacking the sinister, unaccountable element of the Chinese character, and warmed and lighted by the south Italian sunshine.

Neapolitan is rather harder than Venetian, though easier than Sicilian, but the reader who will take the trouble to learn it will be richly rewarded by these striking sonnets of Signor di Giacomo. The poet has used the same "copy" that the journalist found for the short stories, and the latter make a useful background for these almost too elliptic verses. Many of the sonnets are grouped. A dozen or more describe the life of '*O Funneco verde*, the unsavory old tenement which has since been torn down to further the work of public sanitation. Here is a girl who has turned to the bad and broken her mother's heart, but comes home with gold and caresses and pretty frocks, and wins her affection again; and there a mother and daughter are seated quietly sewing, when the police come to announce that their son and brother has been stabbed in the street below; an illicit game of lottery is broken up, and makes a grotesque genre picture full of humor; there is the scene of breathless excitement throughout the neighborhood on the day of the public drawing; there are the grumbling midwife summoned in haste from her own affairs, the old woman money-lender who claims interest of three pennies upon a loan of four, and the sorceress who works with spells of hair and wax and portraits to win back faithless lovers. This last sonnet has these stage directions: "A basin with water on a table in the middle of the room. It is night. Giulia, the *signurella*, muffled in a black shawl, is leaning near the bed of Marianna, who is stirring the water with a little stick. It is raining." Here is the sestet:

"What does it mean?" "If this wax melts away,
Forget him; it would mean he is untrue."

"That girl! Madonna! . . . Not that girl,—I pray!"

"Now let's see. If the wax is melted through. . . ."

Ah, my poor girl!" "It's . . . melted?" "Yes, but I—"

"The brute! Now show me how to make him die!"

A touching series of eight sonnets tells the story of Zi' Munacella, a nun who invokes an ancient church immunity on behalf of her lover, at the cost of her own liberty for life, only to be told by the

Mother Superior that the crime for which he was condemned had been committed for jealousy of another woman. 'O *Munasterio* pictures a poor sailor turning from an unfortunate love affair to the religious life, without any vocation, and still longing for the beautiful world, for green things growing, and for his little fishing boat at night with its lights fore and aft, and the waters of the bay with the moonlight on them. A group entitled *The Street* includes a sonnet upon the old clothes dealer and his indifference to the pathetic and dramatic stories hidden in his wares; the brief tale of a girl who carries to her lover in prison in "San Francisco" an excellent meal of cheese and chicken, bought at a price which he would not like to know of; and a violent bit of realism called *The Dead Man*, where a woman, finding one lying at her door in the morning, mistakes him for drunk, and pours a bucket of cold water on him, crying: "For shame! In the morning, too! And in front of the Church of San Severino!"

Assunta is the defense made before the judge by her lover who has killed her in a fit of jealousy. This one is not a sonnet, but rather more like a ballad, in rough, vigorous metre:

I said to her, "Listen, just listen to me.
It's useless to talk to you,
Yes, *infama*, I know it . . . but listen!
Just listen. . . . Don't laugh, Assù!"

Then of a sudden she said to me,
"Let go of me! Let me be!
It's no good, I am tired of you.
Let go of me, Federi!"

And turning, she threw a greeting
To a man on the pavement-rim.
And her eyes, how they sparkled at him! . . .
Oh God! how she looked at him!

So, judge . . . have some pity on me . . .
I lost my wits, judge, that's flat.
"Have you no feelings in you?" I cried at her.
"Are you just trash? Then . . . take that!"

An unforgettable sequence describes a tragedy taking place in the infamous old prison of "San Francisco," which gives its name to the series.

"You here? You, Don Giovanni!" . . . "As you see. I've come to join your precious company."
 "For bloodshed?" "Humph, yes, blood. I lost my head. And you?" "I bluffed their warning, so they said."

The clock strikes nine, the other prisoners undress and prepare for bed, punctuating the wonted acts with profanities and obscenities; but the two old acquaintances agree to stay up and talk, as the jailer's friendliness, so the more experienced inmate promises, can be assured for a lira. The jailer enters:

"This is a friend of mine. He's just come in."
 "Well?" "He's not sleepy." "Well, what's that to me?"
 "If you'd let him—To keep awake's no sin."
 "Not go to bed? He sha'n't stay up, not he!"
 "My friend, he's just got here. . . . You know he's been—"
 "What are you telling me? You let him be.
 What does he think this is? A jail, or inn?
 We make no fine distinctions here, you see."

"I have a lira here." "What's that you say?"
 "I said I had a lira. What about
 My handing you—?" "Come nearer, and speak lower.
 In paper?" "No, sir, it's in soldi." "Eh,
 Just hand them over softly. Wait! Look out!
 My job is up if one goes on the floor."

Don Peppe thus appeased, the two men sit down together on the bench, and the newcomer, Don Giovanni, tells the other, Tore "Nfamità", of his wife's infidelity:

"But, Don Giovà," said Tore, "Do you claim—
 Your Ronna Ndriana? I don't see, you're so. . . ."
 "Do me the favor—Not that woman's name,
 Or, call her by her right one,—which? *you know*.
 "I've killed her." "Don Giovà!" "Yes. For her shame."
 "Ndriana killed! But when?" "A week ago.
 With some fine young signor she played her game.
 I killed her as I'd kill a dog. One blow."

"But here! Why d'you draw off?" "I? Move away?
 I don't." "Oh yes, you've squeezed half off the bench."

"I? Not at all." "Come nearer." "Ay. . . . You say
 You heard—?" "She fooled me for a year, the wench.
 You know who he was?" "Who . . . he was?" "Yes, *who?*
 That fine friend? Don't you know?" "No . . . who?"
"'Twas you!"

The seventh and last sonnet details the murder of "Nfamità" by Don Giovanni, who then calls in the jailer with ferocious satisfaction:

"Call in Don Peppe! . . . Here you see my friend.
 He . . . loved me well. I've killed him.
 Tit for tat!
 It cost me just a lira. Cheap at that!"

Something of the jerky, overtaking rapidity of the dialogue of these strange sonnets can be carried over into English, along with their dramatic subject matter, but the melody, and humorous or melancholy sweetness of the lyrics, must be taken on trust. In them there is little substance, save a general mood of love or longing, and a sense of the beauty of moonlight over the Parthenopean landscape. Their spell lies partly in their refrain, their lilt, and their temper, and partly in an appealing quality, when used for lyric effect, of the wholly untranslatable dialect. Perhaps one attempt at a lyric may be worth making. For sweetness of feeling and apparent artlessness of melodic effect, *Rosa*, *Rusè* is fairly typical.

ROSA, RUSÈ

Rosa, Rusè, if it may be,
 One thing I would know.
 How did your mother make you
 So full of grace, to grow?

Is that mouth a mouth or a strawberry?
 Are these eyes, or the Milky Way?
 How you are all enchantment,
 Rusella mine, Rusè!

Rosa, Rusella,
 Hold out your hands.
 Let not my heart fall
 Down on the sands.

Love is all made
Of little things.
And here is my heart,
Oh Girl, which sings!

Rosa, Rusè, explain it to me,
The very best you know,
Tell it me plainly and simply,
Do you love me or no?

Pray tell me, are you aware of it,
How I whirl like a moth in your ray?
Hold out your hands and clasp me,
Rusella mine, Rusè!

Rosa, Rusella,
Hold out your hands,
Let not my heart fall
Down on the sands.

Love is all made
Of little things.
And here is my heart,
Oh Girl, which sings!

RUTH SHEPARD PHELPS.